Return to the Kingdom of Childhood

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CONCLUSION

Yes, Lord, forgive France who preaches the straight path but takes the crooked one herself. . . .

Yes, Lord, forgive France who hates occupiers yet imposes occupation so heavily on me.

Who opens the triumphal gate to heroes and treats her Senegalese people as mercenaries, making them the black watchdogs of the Empire.

These verses, from Léopold Sédar Senghor’s poem, “A Prayer for Peace,” denote the epistemic stand from which he develops the philosophy of Negritude. Beside the conciliatory tone of the excerpt, “A Prayer for Peace” indicates that Negritude is an attempt to unveil the inconsistency of the modern narrative of subjectivity, rationality, and individual freedom. It is a nuanced critique of the darker side of the enlightenment, that of colonization, subjugation, and exploitation.

As shown, the narrative of modernity, which attempts to legitimize the colonial project and rationalize the idea of modern universalism, led to the invention of the idea of the native as the negative manifestation of humanity or, as Emmanuel Kant suggests, the materialization of Rousseau’s not-quite human, that is, not quite “enlightened,” “man of nature.” The invention of the subhuman non-white native was all the more feasible that, as Homi Bhabha argues in “Race and Time and the Revision of Modernity,” a reading of Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness,” it is the very nature of modernity to overlook (“in the double sense of social surveillance
and psychic disavowal”) and over-determine (“psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic”) the black subject. As Bhabha demonstrates, the analysis of the temporality of modernity shows that “man” is a fundamentally historical figure. The ethnocentric and marginal figure of “man,” he claims, denotes “the signifying subjectifying category of Western culture, as a unifying referent of ethical value” because the idea of humanity is founded on Western cultural supremacy and racial typology. That is precisely why Franz Fanon acknowledges that there is an imperative that “the black man must be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man.” In reality, as Bhabha and Fanon stipulate, the Black man is not even a man; he is he who does not have the means to take part in the temporality of modern humanity.

This provincial understanding of the concept of “man” facilitated modern scholars such as Gobineau, Hume, Kant, and Hegel’s theorizations of the black subject’s inhumanity. Arthur Gobineau’s Essay on the Inequality of Races, the most influential account on the concept of race of the time, for example, defines Negroes as the missing link between humans and animals and presents the white European as fundamentally rational and, therefore, as the highest point of human development. Along the same line, Georg W. Hegel and Immanuel Kant, two of the fathers of modern Western philosophy, imagine the “Negro” as the negative opposite of a subliminal white subject. While Kant, citing Hume, claims that “Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling [ . . . since] not a single one [Negro] was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality,” Hegel states that “Africa is the land of childhood, which, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.” This racist paradigm laid the ground for early twentieth-century ethnologists such as Lévy-Bruhl, who, in his earlier texts, saw in “primitive African societies,” the manifestation of a “pre-logical mentality.” For all these reasons, Jean-Paul Sartre cynically notes, in his preface to Fanon’s magnum opus, The Wretched of the Earth: “Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives.” The former, Fanon argues in the same text, were colonizers; the latters were colonized. This system was explained and legitimized by the very definitions of humanness developed by the above-mentioned scholars and which, de facto, conceive “others,” as non-human.

This universalization of the modern European conception of humanity and its corollary, the dehumanization of “the native” Negro, con-
stituted the tipping point that led to the birth of Negritude. Since the modern universalization of man set the conditions of possibility of modern colonization, Negritude thinkers understood very quickly that their anti-colonial project had to engage directly the historicity of modern modes of definition of the human. As Senghor asserts in one of his first published articles, the philosophical impetus of the Negritude movement was based on the realization of the necessity to question the universalist and ethnocentric foundations of the modern narrative and to unveil its darker side. And what better way to engage the historicity of ethnocentric modern definitions of the human than to revisit one of the foundations of Western modern thought: Western colonial reason?

Negritude is, thus, a critique of modern rationality and a singular way of defining the human through a radically anti-colonial ontology and epistemology. The Senegalese thinker’s critique of modern reason questions the colonial paradigm, which is based on the premise that since the definition of Homo sapiens is fundamentally inseparable from a particular understanding of sapiens (wise, rational), subjects are determined by their ability (or inability) to have a “rational” relation to the world. On the basis of this principle, modern thinkers such as Gobineau, Kant, and Hegel argue that Africans are not quite human since, as the European scholars postulate, they are not rational. In other words, they are not quite human because they fail to think and to know properly. It is also this fundamental principle that allowed colonization to present itself as a humanist endeavor intended to save subhuman natives by introducing them to rationality. Given that this Euro-centric paradigm constitutes the philosophical foundation of colonization, one needs to acknowledge that any serious critique of colonization needs to point out the epistemic limits of “European rationality” and the provincial peculiarity of the modern subject. Such an endeavor is precisely what Léopold Sédrar Senghor takes on in his entire philosophical production. Although he agrees that the socio-historical experiences of particular human beings conditions their relations to the world, he nonetheless presents the definition of the modern rational subject as one among many other forms of rationality, that is, one of multiple forms of humanities, such as that of Negroes.

Accordingly, the theory of a Negro intuitive epistemology, based on a particular vitalist ontology that ensues from Senghor’s critique of the modern subject constitutes one of the foundations of the philosophy of Negritude. Yet, this aspect of Senghor’s philosophy is too frequently ignored. As shown, except for rare cases such as Donna Jones’ The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy, Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s African Art as
Philosophy, and Messay Kebede’s article, “Negritude and Bergsonism,” there is a surprising silence on Senghor’s epistemology and his ontology as a critique of modernity. Rather, Senghor’s philosophy has been studied since the 1940s as an anti-colonial political movement limited to France and the Francophone world between 1932 and 1960. It is read in relation to how well it represents the aspirations of colonized Negro subjects. Placing Negritude beyond its anti-colonial manifestations allows the exploration of an important, yet neglected, aspect of his oeuvre: Negritude as a philosophical system that functions simultaneously as an epistemology and an ontology. This epistemology and ontology enabled the Senegalese scholar to question Western imperialist definitions of the rational human, to re-define the category of the Negro, and to announce what he calls “métissage, a humanism of the twentieth century.”

On the Limits of Negritude

My attempt to rescue and validate Senghor’s thought as genuine philosophy in its having proposed a theory of being and knowledge that uniquely shows the existence of a Negro epistemology and underwrites a distinct Negro character cannot be accomplished without taking into consideration certain important questions: How can Senghor’s philosophy, developed in conjunction with Western philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Leo Frobenius, escape the temporal and spatial constraints of universalist modern modes of understanding the world, given the hegemony of Eurocentrism? Doesn’t his approach lead him to occupy the space of the subject of the West and thereby re-instate the West as the central subject of history? As opposed to Deleuze’s “pronouncement, that a theory is just a box of tools that has nothing to do with the signifier,”

doesn’t Senghor’s companionship with the above-mentioned modern Western thinkers risk transforming Negritude into a blackening of the latter’s experiences? Moreover, as Spivak poses in “Can the Subaltern Speak,” “what happens when the concrete experience that is the guarantor of the political appeal of [the subaltern] is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme,” especially in the case of Senghor, a Western educated elite trained in the best French schools, a member of the French government and the French academy, and the first president of the Republic of Senegal? In other words, how Western is Senghor’s idea of Africa and how African is his ontology and his epistemology?
These questions show the complexity of the issue at stake and point out some of the limits of anti-colonial discourses in general, and Senghor’s theory in particular. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Senghor frequently fails to go beyond the dichotomous structures that led to the invention of races, that is, the idea of the emotional Negro, fundamentally different from the rational white subject. His famous phrase, “l’émotion est nègre, la raison Hellène” (“emotion is Negro, while Reason is Hellenic)” is a good example that illustrates the effects of the binary modern paradigm on his theory. He uses a perfect Alexandrin, with a caesura right at the sixth syllable, as if he wanted to claim that the Negro is quintessentially opposed to the white subject. In many other instances, the structure of his discourse tends to similarly oppose the category of the Negro to that of the European and to substitute the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” for a supposed Negro-African relation to the world materialized by an “I feel therefore I am.”

In 1937, for instance, Senghor affirmed the impossibility for the Negro to excel in the sciences unless they are particularly gifted. Moreover, his definition of “ethnic characteriology,” which stipulates that the human character is determined by racial particularities, and which leads to the proliferation, in his theory, of assertions such as, “the white European is foremost discursive; the Negro-African foremost intuitive,” participates in the same essentialist paradigm inherited from Western racialist philosophers.

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the effect, on Senghor’s philosophy, of the dangers of speaking of the African and the Negro from the prism of a modern intellectual tradition, even if he attempted to question the provincial modern center of irradiation of knowledge. Unfortunately, such a mode of representation frequently leads to a re-presentation of the other, and therefore, his or her mis-presentation as, precisely, the other of the modern Western subject. It is this particular perspective that led Anglophone African critics of the Ibadan school to associate Negritude with the colonial question of assimilation. These critics argue that Negritude cannot escape the filter of Western domination, which is the reason for its being; that the poets and theoreticians of Negritude are Eurocentric thinkers who respond to the concerns of Europe more than they re-think the concept of Africa from an African perspective; that the history of Negritude is inseparable from that of racism and Negro oppression; and that it functions as a Francophone African re-articulation of Western philosophy. Assuming that Negritude follows the Eurocentric paradigm put forth by modern Western philosophy, these critics, namely, the early Wole Soyinka and Eziekel Mphahlele, consider it to be a francophone African
nationalist movement. Mphahlele was one of the harshest critics. Arguing that “Negritude tells only half of the story of Africa,” he comments, with an allusion to Senghor, that it is “the assimilated African who has absorbed French culture, who is now passionately waiting to recapture his past.” On these grounds, Mphahlele questions Negritude’s pertinence as an Afri-centered discourse.

As Mphahlele implies, it is true that colonization attempted, in many ways, to transform the colonial elite into a pale copy of a Western subject in order to better serve their own interests. It has, thus, undoubtedly produced scholars who were nothing short of echoes of European voices. Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Indian education” is a good example of this colonial policy and its effects on the colonized mind. He declares:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

Macaulay’s proposed education system is, in many ways, similar to the logic that led to the politics of assimilation in Francophone Africa. As a result, Soyinka and Mphahlele would agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s claim that:

Insofar as the academic discourse of history . . . is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.” In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.

These scholars have all the rights to consider elites such as Senghor to be “non-authentic internal informants” whose interest, and therefore relations to the world, are fundamentally different from the ones of the subaltern groups they claim to represent. It is along these lines that major African scholars organized the funeral services of Negritude at the 1969 Pan-African Festival. At the first plenary session, for example,
Ahmed Sékou Touré claimed, in a direct attack on Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Negritude is a false concept, an irrational weapon encouraging the irrationality based on racial discrimination arbitrarily exercised upon the peoples of Africa, Asia, and upon men of color in America and Europe.” Two days later, Mamadi Keita added, “Negritude is actually a good mystifying anesthetic for Negroes who have been whipped too long and too severely to a point where they have lost all reason and become purely emotional.” This celebration of the death of Negritude, repeated by most participants (among them Henri Lopes and Wabu Baker Osman), culminated at the closing ceremony, when Stanislas Adotevi declared:

There was a time when Negritude served a useful though limited purpose: it shook a few consciences and brought a few Negroes together, and this was a good thing. . . . In consequence, we should consider it as a primitive period necessary to the African renaissance. But today it is no more than a “political mysticism” which impedes progress by perpetuating the myth of Negro irrationality and neglecting to provide practical solutions to Africa’s most pressing problems. As an ideology it is “shallow, vague, inefficient” and dangerously misleading. Negritude was born dead; it was going to die and it died.

As Adotevi was finishing his speech to a sympathetic cheering crowd, one had the impression of assisting at the final burial of Negritude. It was not long before a new generation of African scholars, such as Marcien Towa, Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, and Yambo Ouologuem, started speaking of what can be called, today, “post-negritude.” This critique of Negritude’s essentialist anti-colonial discourse and its theoreticians’ claim to be the voices of the voiceless is developed from the same intellectual perspective as Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of Foucault and Deleuze’s conception of the transparent intellectual subject in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” A quick demonstration of the limits of Spivak’s conclusions will therefore enable me to show the limits of the “post-negritude” tradition.

While Foucault and Deleuze agree that the intellectual has the tools to represent true reality through a transparent objective position, Spivak contends that despite the complexity and validity of Foucault and Deleuze’s understandings of the heterogeneous network of power.desire/interest, the method that they propose is unfit to embody the voice of the silenced and disenfranchised subaltern subject. For Spivak, these scholars’ conception of the “transparency” of their subjective positions, the ideo-
logical limits of their disciplinary locations, and their ignorance of the epistemic violence of imperialism is intrinsically detrimental to the subaltern subject, whose subjectivity is constantly denied in favor of a universal European subjective position that limits the necessary disclosure of the discourse of the other and the discourse of otherness. The solution, she proposes is, thus, to abandon Foucault and Deleuze for a more inclusive and differing deconstructive method.

Yet, beyond the relevance of Spivak’s revolutionary article in the field of postcolonial studies and despite the limits of Foucault and Deleuze’s subjective positions, can one deny that the French scholars have both produced interesting and groundbreaking philosophical methods that may not necessarily lead us to hear the subaltern, but which have nonetheless enabled the development of new ways of showing the epistemic limits of modern Western Eurocentric and universalist modes of definition of the world? How can one question, for instance, the usefulness of Foucault’s analysis of Western discursive orders, which led to some of the most complex, timely, and important reflections on our postcolonial situation such as Mudimbe’s two canonical books, *The Idea of Africa* and *The Invention of Africa*?

As stated, Spivak’s critique of Foucault and Deleuze’s methods and positions as a means to represent the subaltern is similar to that of the above-mentioned critics of Senghor’s philosophy. The latter present the Senegalese scholar as unable to represent the being of the Negro, given his particular political and intellectual location. As in the case of Spivak’s reading of Foucault and Deleuze, however, the acknowledgment of the limits of Senghor’s theory should not lead specialists of African studies to silence other even more complex and more interesting developments of the philosophy of Negritude. Although it is arguable that Negritude is not, as Senghor claims, the materialization of Negro-African cultural values and a *mise en discours* of a Neger Sein, its manifestation as the Afri-centered philosophy of one man, versed in the Sereer culture, who proposes not only one of the pioneering but also one of the most complex and timely critiques of colonial reason through an alternative ontology and epistemology, is still relevant. We should, thus, beware of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

In light of this argument, I have attempted, throughout this book, to trace the meaning and relevance of Senghor’s philosophy instead of repeating the age-old question of his ability or inability to represent silenced African voices. This perspective shows, almost a century after the first texts published by Senghor, that Negritude is not merely a failed ethnosophy but a philosophy of one man, whose knowledge of Afri-
can cultures allowed to develop, from an “African” perspective, one of the most important philosophical critiques of colonial reason and a ground-breaking ontology and epistemology. In order to understand Senghor’s project, it is, thus, important to bear in mind Anthony Appiah’s explanation of Wole Soyinka’s intention in writing *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

The novel, Soyinka declares, is more individualist and atomic than the self of precapitalist societies; it is a creature of modern economic relations. I do not know that this new conception of the self was inevitable, but it is no longer something that we in Africa could escape even if we wanted to. And if we cannot escape it, let us celebrate it [. . . ] and celebrate it in the work of Wole Soyinka, who has provided in his plays a literary experience whose individuality is an endless source of insight and pleasure.

Along the same lines, it is important to note that the philosophical essay and even the poetry produced by postcolonial African scholars are fundamentally individualistic accounts. Senghor, for that matter, is a modern subject who authored his own books and reaped the benefits of his copyright returns. His oeuvre needs, therefore, to be read accordingly. Reading Senghor’s philosophy as a subjective reflection on particular issues does not, however, invalidate his representation of African particularities. In fact, despite his subjective position, the Sereer scholar is speaking from what Molefi Ashante calls an African *djed*, that is, an Afri-centered standpoint.

Although Senghor’s oeuvre cannot be read as a means to disclose the voice-consciousness of Negro cultures that are so often not heard, it is nonetheless clear that it is from a particular African cultural background that he develops his theory of Negritude. It is important to keep in mind, as has been shown, that the theory of Negritude was inspired by the literary works of Marone Ndiaye, the poetess of Joal, who provided him with his first encounters with the ideas of Negritude, when, during his childhood, she used to sing the praise of *Kiim o’baal, dyaag fo nut, dyag fo ngel* (“The black skinned man, handsome with his eyes closed, handsome in the arena”). As Senghor declares, it is “true that it [Negritude] springs forth, directly, from African sources, even if, sometimes, it takes a detour through the Negro-Americans.” He adds, in 1988, “[Marone Ndiaye’s] *kim njom* [poems . . . ] would remain carved in my memory [. . . . ] They were one of the major reasons for my pride to be black. And as early as my years at the seminary.” It is precisely this cultural
standpoint that enables him, at eight years old, to question one of his grade school teachers, Father Lallousse, who claimed the uncivilized nature of African cultures. As Senghor recalls:

[Father Lallousse], A particularly strict holy man [. . . ] insisted on our weaknesses and denounced our backwardness especially in terms of civilization. Since I had received a bourgeois and even aristocratic education, I often reacted by telling him that we too had a civilization. 30

It is the same African intellectual background that allows the young student to agree with Bergson’s revolutionary critique of Western epistemology. When, in the early 1940s, the theoretician of Negritude reads *Time and Free Will: Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 31 he proclaimed: Eureka! Bergson has proven that “facts and matter, which are the objects of discursive reason, were only the outer surface that needed to be transcended by *intuition* in order to achieve an *in-depth vision of reality.*” 32 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Messay Kebede, and Donna Jones have interpreted this intellectual acquaintance with Bergson as a reiteration of the latter’s philosophy. One needs, however, to see in Senghor’s use of the Bergsonian paradigm a strategic act that enables him to steal the modern miraculous weapons. These epistemic tools validate his philosophy and allow him to participate in the modern and postmodern evaluation of “Western rationality,” one of the foundations of colonization. Yet, the Senegalese philosopher’s vitalist theory of knowledge is, in many ways, based on the lessons he learned in Joal and Djiloor from his maternal uncle, Waly Bakhoum, and the traditionalists of his father’s compound. As he frequently reminds his readers, it is his uncle Waly who taught him to reach towards the totality of the universe because “the Negro-African ontology is unitary: the unity of the universe realizes itself, in God, through the convergence of complementary forces that come from God and that are coordinated toward God.” 33

It is worth noting, thus, that Senghor’s most complex explanations of the concept of Negritude are always developed through ethnological reflections on Negro African cultures’ representations of ontology. For all these reasons, one can argue that when Senghor reads Bergson’s essay and presents it as an intellectual revolution, it is not, as Jones, Kebede, and Diagne claim, because he discovers in the modern philosopher’s text something new that will inform his entire theory; his reaction is rather prompted by his conviction that Bergson’s understanding of the limits of modern Western philosophy provides him with the conceptual means
to formulate what he had already known: the primacy of emotion as a means to reach the immediate data of consciousness, and, therefore, the limits of colonial reason. Western modern philosophical tradition is, in Senghor’s oeuvre, a means to legitimize his Afri-centered theory, in the same way that Sartre’s preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* legitimizes the work of an undoubtedly Afri-centered scholar such as Franz Fanon. Rather than the place of Western subjectivity, the space occupied by Senghor can be presented as a manifestation of his own agency.

From this perspective, one can argue that, as opposed to the traditional limitation of Negritude to a blackened version of European modernity, the modern paradigm the father of Negritude adopts, at times, has a less defining effect on his philosophy than it is assumed. The instances when he repeats the modern dichotomous structure are, in fact, quickly complicated by his more complex Afri-centered theory of knowledge and subjectivity, which, ultimately, differs from the Western modern paradigm and even questions it. Notwithstanding the pervasive effect of power, African scholars such as Senghor are agents that can sustain their subjectivities while being in dialogue with the West. After decades of celebration of the death of Negritude, looking at Senghor’s oeuvre in these terms will place Negritude beyond the anti-colonial dialectic and beyond the ethnophilosophical perspective of the post-colonial era, while enabling contemporary readers to discover new developments in Léopold Sédar Senghor’s philosophy. One can therefore say: No, Negritude is not dead. It is more relevant now than ever.